

BOOK REVIEW

*Thoreau's Country: Journey Through a Transformed Landscape*, by David R. Foster. 1999. xiv + 270 pp. illustrations, bibliographic essay, index. ISBN 0-674-88645-3 \$27.95 (hardcover). Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

If you have ever crossed paths with a lichen-encrusted stone wall or a lonely cellar hole on a walk through a New England forest, you may have wondered how such things came to be in the middle of the woods. Who built them, and why? New England's stone walls have maintained a constant presence across the land over the centuries, but what changes have they witnessed in their lifetimes? How have the forests changed? How has the human impact on the landscape changed?

Such are the questions that can be answered by combining the observations of a nineteenth century naturalist with those of a twentieth century ecologist. In *Thoreau's Country: Journey Through a Transformed Landscape*, David R. Foster provides us with a window through which we can look back on New England's past. This window is actually the eye of one of New England's most keen 19th century observers, Henry David Thoreau. Though Thoreau is probably most well known for his philosophical writings, his daily journals afford an invaluable source of insight on daily life and nature in the mid-1800s. Foster, Director of the Harvard Forest since 1990, masterfully weaves Thoreau's observations into a tapestry that illustrates the origins of today's forests. Through his thoughtful introductions to each chapter, Foster makes a convincing case that it is necessary to know the cultural and natural history of New England in order to more fully understand the present day ecology of our own landscape.

Foster has tastefully selected and organized hundreds of Thoreau's journal entries into chapters that illustrate many aspects of the mid-1800s, when New England was at its peak in agricultural production. In Thoreau's time, more than 60 percent of the land in southern New England had been cleared and tamed, while the remaining sections were constantly subject to the axe and saw to supply an increasing demand for firewood and timber. Foster uses Thoreau's talent for imagery and detail to conjure up a striking picture of the 19th century countryside: pockets of isolated woodlands in a matrix of cultivated fields, meadows, and pastures,

much the opposite of what we see today. The land was kept in this unnatural state by the endless toil of the New England farmers, who Thoreau described as heroic in their year-round work to improve their land and their livelihoods. The book contains a wealth of information about 19th century land use practices, which are ultimately responsible for determining the destiny of the forests that followed.

The reader will be amazed to discover that Thoreau, through his years of very detailed observations, was able to describe modern ecological concepts years before scientists would actually publish them. It was Thoreau who coined the term "forest succession" after he watched different species of trees reclaim the land that was increasingly being abandoned by farmers as they moved west or to the cities. He also recognized that each kind of tree had a situation in which it grew best, in essence that each species had its own niche. Foster points out that if 20th century ecologists had paid more attention to the works of Thoreau, much time and effort might have been saved in the rediscovery of these concepts. The fruitless attempts to grow white pine on clear-cut pine stands in the early part of this century could have been avoided if anyone had studied Thoreau; he anticipated that the dominance of white pine in New England would be a direct result of 19th century land use practices, and that hardwoods naturally recruit underneath the pines.

Although the changes that brought about the forests of today were well under way by the mid-1800s, the landscape was a vastly open one compared to today, and the communities of organisms were very different. Thoreau's journal entries are invaluable in that they describe an ecosystem that is completely outside of the experience of anyone living in our time. In his journals, Thoreau romanticized about the songs of bobolinks and meadowlarks, but bewailed the loss of the "noble" animals such as deer and bear. Today the situation is reversed, and we are concerned with preserving the diversity of the once common field species, which are declining at an alarming rate. Thoreau also observed the passenger pigeon and the American chestnut fulfilling their original ecological roles. Today the pigeon is extinct and the chestnut has been reduced to a shadow of its former stature by the chestnut blight.

*Thoreau's Country: Journey Through a Changing Landscape* would be of great interest to both the beginning naturalist and the

experienced ecologist. Detailed and often romantic accounts of 19th century life and nature are combined with ecological principles and thoughtful reflections in such a way that readers gain a new appreciation for the hard life of their ancestors and for their ancestors' legacy, the woods through which we walk today. The book is well organized and enjoyable to read, complete with beautiful line drawings that depict life in a time gone by.

Having read the book, one can find new meaning in the forest landscape and be able to picture where it may have come from. You will find that the wall you discovered on your walk was most likely built from stones removed from a plowed field, and positioned to divide a pasture on the hill from the fertile soils in the lowland. The stones for the wall were relocated by the strain and sweat of a farmer who once lived in the house that sat upon the mossy foundation. The old oak tree with the spreading lower branches, another witness to more than a century of change, probably once shaded his livestock in the sweltering heat of a summer day. The other trees are the products of a predictable and ongoing succession of species that started when the farmer and his family abandoned their New England home to seek gold in California. You will also realize that as you stand on the same spot as the old farmer and look upon the same wall, you are just taking another snapshot, observing an instant in the continuous story of natural change that shapes and forms our reality.

—LAUREN F. HOWARD, Department of Plant Biology, University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH 03824.